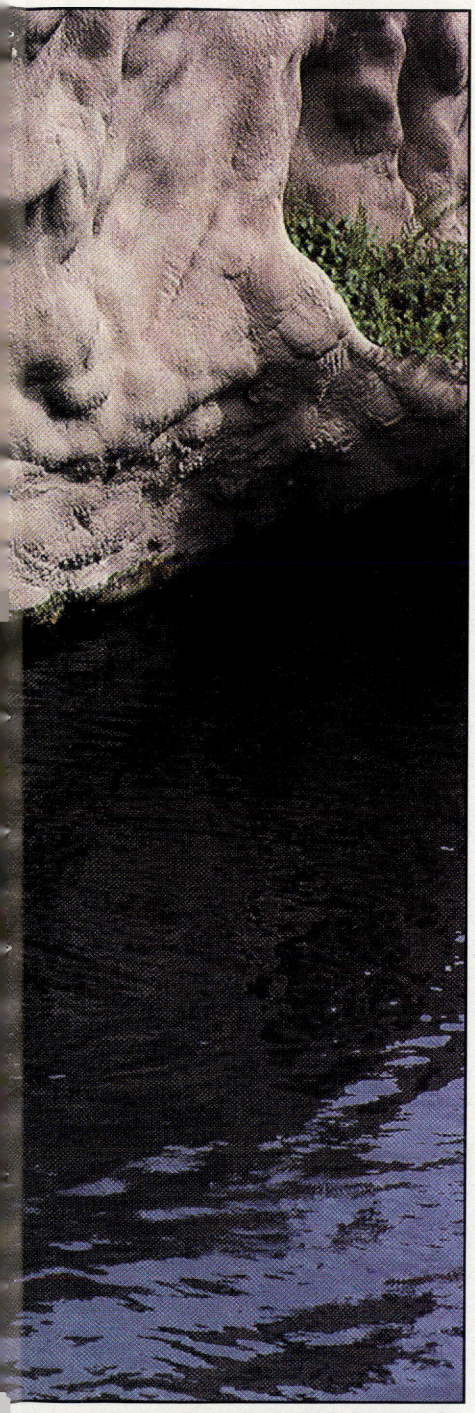
Aquarena Antics

By Eva Jolene Boyd
Photographs by Bill Reaves

"And now, introducing the star of our show—Ralph the Swimming Pig!" bellows the announcer at 75-acre Aquarena Springs in San Marcos. Suddenly, the unlikely star appears, a diminutive pink porker who begins every show at Aquarena's submarine theater with his world renowned "swine dive."



A swimming pig indeed! But then, Aquarena Springs is not your run-of-the-mill attraction. No stories-high water slides or other "thrill rides" interfere with your view of the natural beauty of this enchanting water park in Central Texas. And, what's more, you will discover underwater surprises as you cruise in a glass-bottom boat, or view a show in the one-of-a-kind submarine theater. And you can take in a bird's-eye view of the springs and their well-landscaped environs from the Swiss Sky Ride or the Sky Spiral.

The springs that have drawn humans to this idyllic location for millennia formed during the Tertiary Period, some 65 million years ago. They emerged when a series of fault lines slipped and created the Balcones Escarpment. As the western portion rose, the Edwards Aquifer, which flowed beneath the plateau, surfaced along the fault as artesian springs. The largest spring gives rise to the San Marcos River and gives life to Aquarena Springs.

As rivers go, the San Marcos, discovered and named by Alonso de Leon's expedition in 1689, is hardly Texas-size. One of the shortest in the state, it courses only about 70 river miles before it joins the Guadalupe. But what the San Marcos may lack in length, it more than makes up for in biological diversity and historical significance, not to mention sheer volume of water.

Dr. Joel Shiner, professor of anthropology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, says that the springs yield evidence of the "longest continuous record of Indian occupation at any locality in North America."

The Clovis Indians were the first people drawn to the springs, some 12,000 years ago. Their artifacts, including Clovis points, flint tools, and bones of such animals as bison, alligator, and mammoth have been found here. The Archaic cultures followed, replaced eventually by the more modern Comanche and Apache peoples.

Spanish Franciscan missionaries arrived next. They struggled to establish Roman Catholicism here in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Their San Xavier missions foundered, however, because of Indian troubles,

Eva Jolene Boyd, a free-lance writer who lives in Ingram, wrote the popular article "On the Old Chisholm Trail" in the June 1988 issue of Texas Highways.

Above, Ralph the Swimming Pig performs his famous swine dive at Aquarena Springs in San Marcos. The diminutive porker then swims after a bottle in the clear spring-fed lake (right).

floods, and filibuster attacks.

But Texians continued the effort to colonize the area. And, by the late 1840s, settlers began arriving here. One of the town's founders, General Edward Burleson, vice-president of the Republic of Texas from 1841-1844, built the first dam below the springs to power a mill. The impounded water became known as Spring Lake.

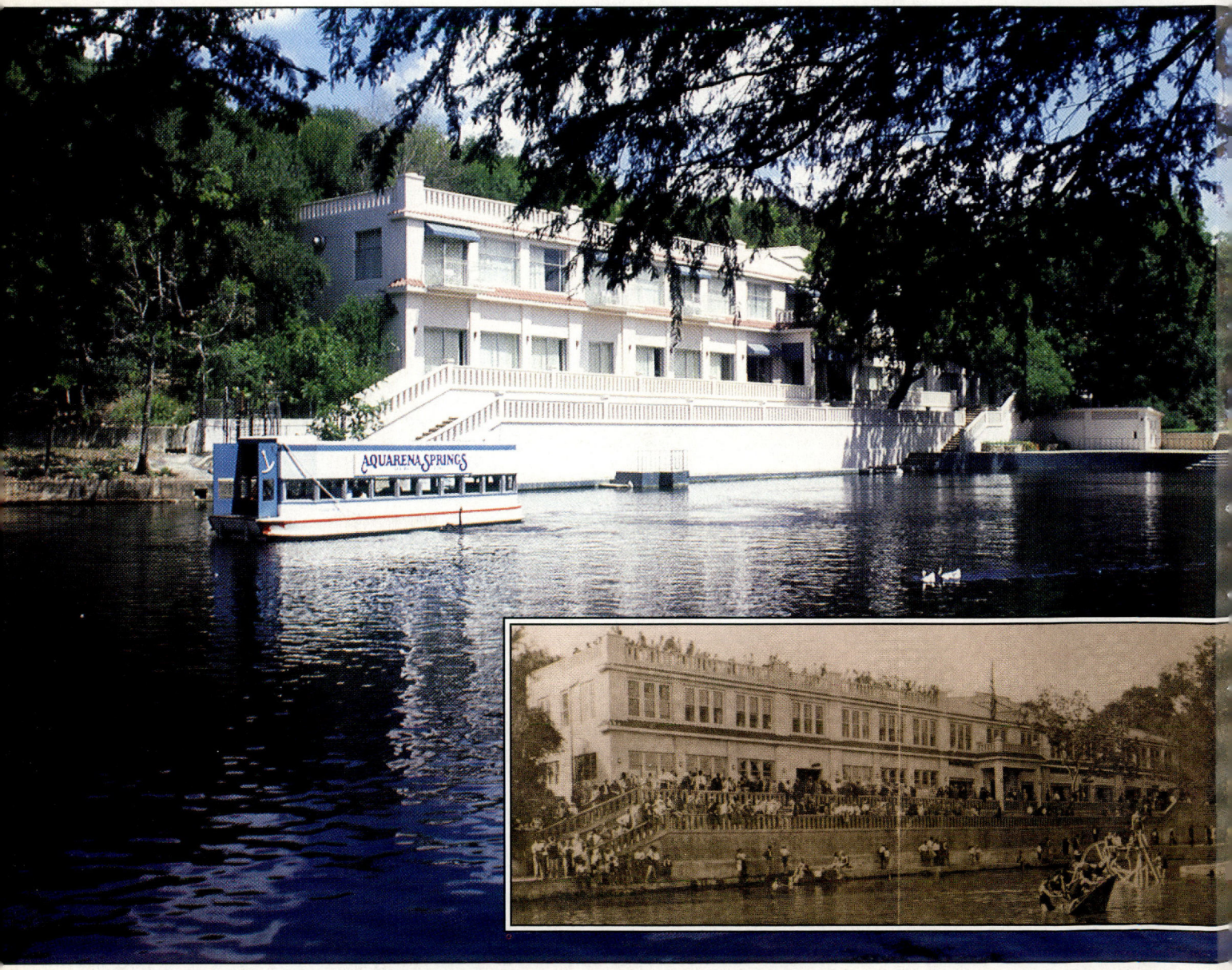
Arthur Birch Rogers, who came from a prominent family of early San Marcos settlers, envisioned a resort on the land he owned on Spring Lake. The first part of his dream, the two-story Rogers Spring Lake Hotel, opened on April 22, 1929, right on the headwaters of the river and against a cliff that marks the fault line. On opening night, some 600 celebrants attended a rooftop dance. Dancing under the stars proved so popular, according to hotel historian Al McGehee, that weekly dances with name bands continued for years.

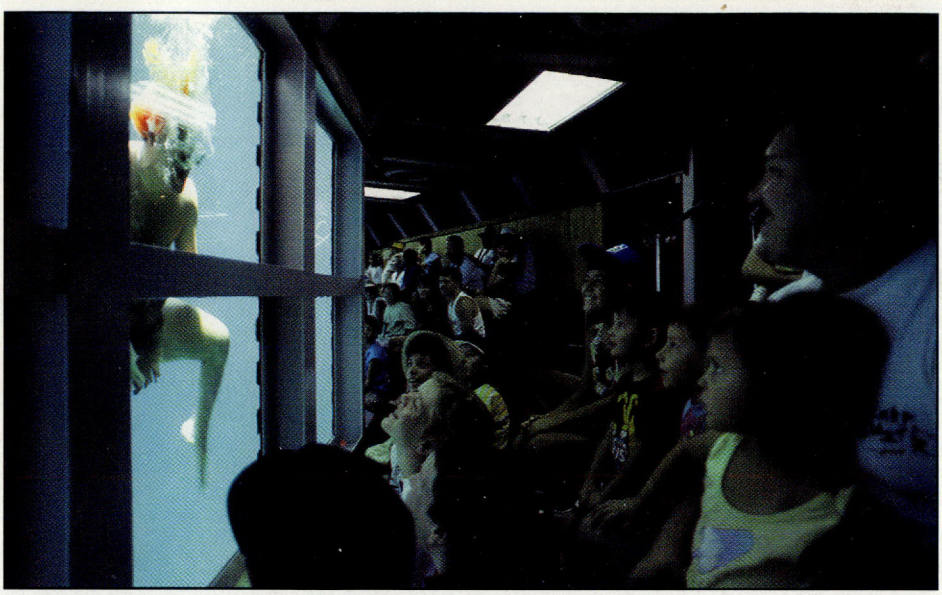
The hotel became well known for its hospitality and unusual facilities. Guests swam in the lake and even viewed the world of the springs from a glass-fronted submersible elevator at the hotel. An assortment of water "toys," including swings and a slide, plunged visitors into the cool 71-degree lake water.

Rogers had to close the hotel during the Depression. For the next 30 years, the building served as hospital, sanitarium, health spa, and the Brown School for Exceptional Children.

But Paul Rogers, Arthur's son, kept alive his father's vision of a water park. In 1946, he installed a small glass panel in the bottom of a large canvas-topped rowboat and offered short tours on Spring Lake to look at the fish. Even though the visitors had to power the oars themselves, the

An electric-powered, glass-bottomed boat floats past Aquarena Springs Inn, built as the Spring Lake Hotel. Several hundred people attended the hotel's opening on April 22, 1929. Today, the bed and breakfast inn features a nine-hole golf course and a swimming pool.





Visitors board the submersible *S.S. Atlantis* (left) to see Ralph's swine dive and the underwater show. Above, an Aquaman's antics entertain folks in the submarine theater. Peggy Farrell (above left), one of the Aquamaids, performs gracefully for the crowd.

boat was such a success that it led to the 26-foot-long, electric-motor crafts in use at Aquarena Springs today.

Paul expanded his plans for a resort. Ever the planner, he went to Florida to observe other water parks. There he met Don Russell at Weeki Wachee Springs near Brooksville, and hired him to come to San Marcos. Together, they opened Aquarena Springs in early 1951.

One of the ideas that accompanied Don to Texas was a submersible theater, inspired by the underwater auditorium at Weeki Wachee. But while Weeki Wachee's theater remains stationary beneath the surface, Aquarena Springs' almost 280-seat *S.S. Atlantis*, first installed in 1950, actually submerges. The only one of its kind in the world, the Atlantis works on the same principle as a submarine by flooding the ballast tanks. The theater thus gives patrons the opportunity to see some surface antics, including Ralph's famous swine dive, before the underwater activities begin. (Claustrophobics need not worry: theatergoers always have access to dry land.)

According to the late Gene Phillips,

Strollers can feed the ducks and swans along Spring Lake, home to more than 100 species of aquatic life. Aquarena Springs boasts the only glass-bottomed boats in Texas.

Lush vegetation shades the trail that runs past the alligator exhibit. Nearby, visitors can see a 100-year-old gristmill and springhouse, a log cabin built in the 1840s, and a bell tower where an old Spanish mission stood.

From the glass-bottomed boats, you can see Spring Lake's rich aquatic life, including bass, sunfish, and catfish. The lake's springs produce almost 200 million gallons of water a day.

who was general manager from 1972 to 1985, Don first thought of using a pig in the water show, "because no one thought pigs could swim." (Sea lions starred initially, but the salt-water mammals fared poorly in the fresh water.)

That was in 1958. Around 1967, Charles Kuralt of CBS got wind of Aquarena Springs' porcine headliner and brought his "On the Road" crew down. Since then, Ralph has appeared on "That's Incredible," been featured in *Sports Illustrated* magazine, wowed the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, and made a couple of appearances on Japanese television.

Has fame spoiled the peripatetic porker? Hard to say, there have been so many Ralphs—"about 15 a year," says Arthur Jungwirth, director of public relations. Training begins when piglets are two or three days old by introducing them to a special formula from a baby bottle. Gradually, coaches coax them to swim to the bottle. Stardom is brief, however. When the porker puts on too many pounds, he (or she—both sexes play the part) doesn't swim too well and the dive becomes a little less than, well, swan-like.

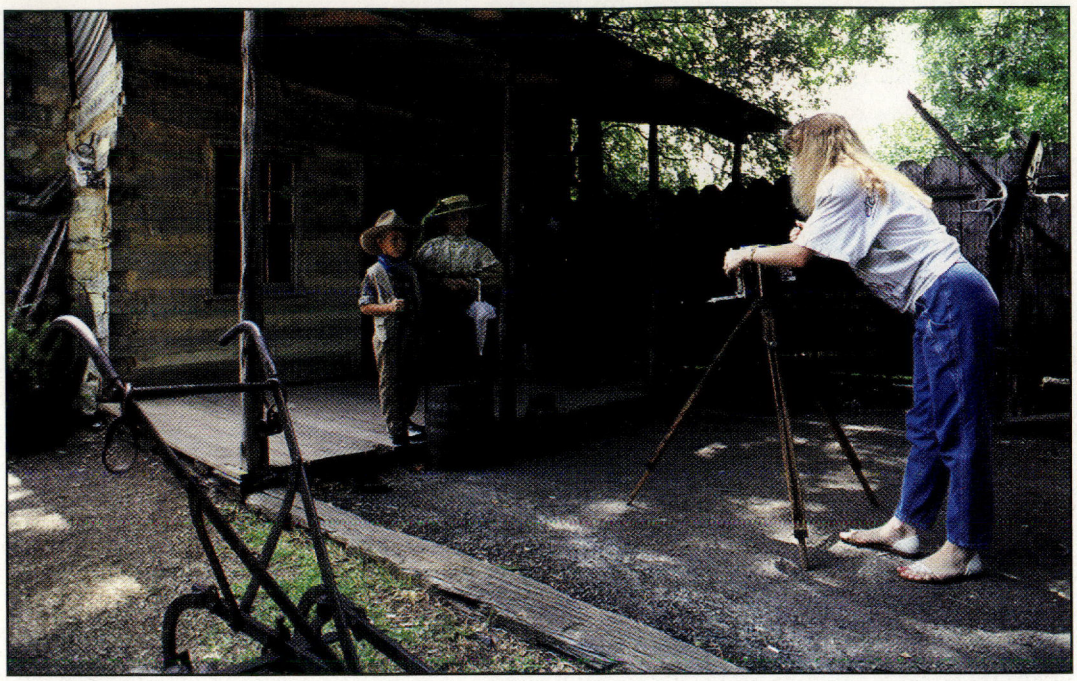
Ralph does not hog the show by any means. Human divers put on memorable displays of underwater acrobatics, ballet, and comedy, as well.

So Arthur Rogers' dream of a water park grew to life, with a little help from others—and a few revisions along the way. After extensive renovation, the old hotel reopened in 1961 as Aquarena Springs Inn. Today, hotel guests enjoy a wonderful continental breakfast daily, as well as the added treat of playing 18 holes of golf on a nine-green course. The Inn's large, refreshing pool has replaced swimming in the lake, and the first water "toys" of Arthur Rogers' resort, the swings and slide, are long gone. But throughout the years, Paul Rogers' innovative canvas-topped rowboat with the little panes of glass on the bottom has remained a favorite of visitors to Spring Lake. Now, Aquarena Springs will show you the underwater world of the springs in a customized glass-bottomed boat, and you won't even have to row.

The half-hour tours can't possibly cover all the springs—more than 200 feed the lake—but stops are made at those with such intriguing names as "Salt and Pepper," "Johnny Weissmuller" (who played Tarzan in the movies during the Thirties and Forties), "Diversion," and "Cream of Wheat." The springs produce almost 200 million gallons of water every day, enough to replenish the half-mile lake completely every 12 hours.

The deepest part of the lake, appropriately named "Deep Hole," lies along the ferry route between Pirate's Cove and Dead Man's Landing. The lake here currently bottoms out at 37 to 40 feet. Many artifacts found by archeologists in Deep Hole are on display at Pirate's Cove in Texana Village.

Spring Lake supports a wide variety of plant life, including rare Texas wild rice. Besides fish such as largemouth bass, 17 varieties of colorful



Robin Schmerber (left), the old-time photographer, shoots costumed visitors in front of the log cabin at Texana Village.

Keith Brewer helps a macaw pick the best poker hand against a young gambler from the audience. The bird theater features entertainment by Bertha the Bicycling Bird and other trained macaws.

Below, the Swiss-made gondolas of the Sky Ride carry visitors on a panoramic journey across Spring Lake. Glass-bottomed boats and the submarine theater can be seen at ground level.

sunfish, and albino and blue catfish, visitors will probably see several species of turtles paddling among the springs, and an occasional Redhead duck as it swims effortlessly past the boat.

Back on land, the Texana Village offers ample opportunities to look into the area's more recent past. Some of the historical buildings in the village, such as the 1846 Eli Merriman cabin (the first home built in San Marcos), were transported in their entirety to Aquarena Springs. Others were cannibalized from other period structures. All are authentic. For instance, the building housing the Golden Eagle Saloon, barber shop, and general store was built with materials from the old Sam Maverick home in San Antonio.

A 19th Century jail from Kyle and a blacksmith shop, as well as an assortment of wagons, buggies, and frontier artifacts, round out the village. Be sure to browse through the gift shops (don't forget the archeological display at Pirate's Cove), dine at the excellent full-menu restaurant, or feed the ducks, geese, and swans from one of the many food dispensers.

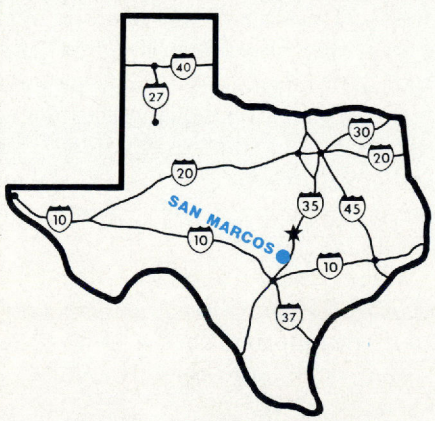
The Hanging Gardens on the hills across Spring Lake provide a paradise of flowing fountains and lush native vegetation. You can get there by ferry or the Swiss Sky Ride. Or try both—go over by one and return by the other.

Some very personable and talented macaws, featured in Aquarena Springs' bird show, charm visitors with their chatter. You may want to pay a respectful visit to the alligators, who have their own area here.

Relax in the historical structures on the hill, the 100-year-old gristmill and springhouse (remodeled to house a delicious candy and Blue Bell ice cream bar) and the dog-trot log cabin that General Burleson built in 1848. Near the Sky Spiral, a re-created church bell-tower marks the general site of the 18th Century Franciscan mission, now vanished.

The towering Sky Spiral dominates Aquarena Springs. Built in 1979, the ride lifts you almost 300 feet above the lake, the ascent taking a leisurely 45 seconds. Near the top, the cylinder comes to a stop, then begins to revolve and gives you a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. You will see the red castle-like "Old Main" building on the campus of Southwest Texas State University, the Blackland Prairie to the east, and the rolling Hill Country to the west.

Take the Sky Ride back, and you will have a delightful view of Aquarena Springs. As the Swiss-made gondola glides slowly above the surface of the lake, enjoy your privileged perch. Spot the submarine theater and Texana Village below, and drink in the picture of landscaped lawns leading down to the edge of the San Marcos. Whether under water or sailing through the sky, Aquarena Springs provides the perfect way to explore this river bubbling to life at the edge of the Texas Hill Country.



When...Where...How

You can reach Aquarena Springs by taking the Aquarena Springs exit from Interstate 35 at San Marcos, about 25 miles south of Austin and 45 miles north of San Antonio.

Open year round, the park's hours are 10 to 8 from Memorial Day weekend until Labor Day, and 10 to 5 the rest of the year. Tickets (purchased in the main gift shop) include all attractions and are $9.95 for senior citizens age 60 and above, $12.95 for other adults, and $11.95 for children four to 11 (free to younger children). All prices are plus tax. Ask for special rates for groups of 15 or more. There is no charge to enter the grounds, and tickets may be obtained for individual shows or rides at $4.95 each. The submarine theater show and rides on the glass-bottom boats are accessible to the physically impaired.

The restaurant is open from 6:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. The gift shop is open from 9:30 a.m. to a half-hour after dusk.

The Aquarena Springs Inn has 24 rooms, and rates range from $45 and up, depending upon the season. Included in the rates are use of the swimming pool, coffee in the room, and a continental breakfast served in the lobby. The golf course has a $5.75 green fee on weekdays, and a $6.50 fee on weekends, with cart rental available. Reservations for lodging are recommended.

For more information, write to Aquarena Springs, Box 2330, San Marcos 78667, or call 512/396-8900. For reservations at the Inn, write to the above address or call 512/396-8901.